



How to read The Church Records for Iceland

Liv H. Anderson, CG[®], AG[®]
Andersonlh@familysearch.org

This class is designed to teach family history researchers how to read the Church Records for Iceland.

Objectives:

Patrons will be able find family in the Church Records from early 1700-1920s

- Birth and Christening records (Fæddir)
- Confirmation Records (Fermdir)
- Marriage Records (Hjónaband)
- Death and Burial Records (Dauðir)
- Moving Records (Innkomnir, Burtviknir)

Background:

To understand the church records of Iceland it is good to learn about its history.

Pre-1150

Iceland's history starts around year 800 when the island, which is in the North Atlantic Ocean was settled during the Viking age exploration and settled by a mixed Norse and Celtic population. Iceland was a free state up to year 1200, when it became subject to the Norwegian king. After the Reformation in 1536, Iceland formally became part of Denmark.

The first people to settle in Iceland were probably Irish monks who came in the 8th century. A Norwegian Viking by the name Naddodd and a Swede named Gardar Svavarsson came around year 860, and Iceland was then called Garðarholmr. However, in the 9th century, they were driven out by the Vikings. The first Viking attempt to settle was by a Norwegian named Floke Vilgerdsson who came from Rogaland in Norway. He landed in the northwest, but a severe winter killed his domestic animals and he sailed back to Norway. He named the land Iceland.

The first permanent settlement was most likely led by Ingolv Arnesson from Fjaler, Norway who settled there in 874 when he sailed with his family, slaves, and animals.

When he sighted Iceland Ingolfur dedicated his wooden posts to his gods and then threw them overboard. He vowed to settle at the place where the sea washed them up. He then explored Iceland. When the posts were found in the southwest of Iceland Ingolfur and his household settled there. He called the place Reykjavik, meaning Smokey Bay. Many other Vikings followed him to Iceland.

There were very good fishing grounds around Iceland and the land was well suited for sheep. Many Vikings brought flocks with them and soon sheep became a major Icelandic industry. The population of Iceland soared. By about 930 there were about 60,000 people living in Iceland.

The climate was milder than what it is today, and the population grew as people settled and farmed the whole island. Later, around 930 it became necessary to organize rules and regulations. Thus started the rule of chiefs called Godar. Around year 930 the Icelanders created an assembly for the whole island called the Althing. The Chief Ulvjljot was sent to Norway to obtain knowledge on Norwegian laws. In 930 was the Ulvjljot laws introduced, patterned after the law Gulatingsloven (Norwegian Gulating law) which was accepted at the Alting (Alting, Althing, Althingi) which is the world's oldest parliaments.

1150-1550

The first missionaries were sent to Iceland around year 999-1000 by Olav Tryggvason (king of Norway) and Christianity (Catholic faith) was accepted by the Althing. The Icelandic chief Gissur Hvite Teitsson sent his son Isleiv to a German monastery, and he later became the 1st bishop at [Skálholt](#), Iceland.

Under his son's rule as a bishop, tithing was introduced and learning to read and write was encouraged by the bishop. Icelandic literature goes back to the early year of 1000. Iceland has Saga's that were written back to the early times and people in Iceland today have no problem reading these Sagas. In 1152 the Icelandic church came under the authority of a Norwegian archbishop. In those days the church was closely allied to the state. When the Icelandic church became subordinate to the Norwegian church it meant the Norwegian king's influence in Iceland slowly increased.

Iceland becomes subject to Norway

Finally, the Norwegian king Håkon Håkonsson succeeded in getting the people of Iceland to subject themselves to Norway (1261-1264). An agreement was made where the people in Iceland had to pay taxes to the king of Norway, but he would give them protection and would send ships with supplies each year. The king appointed 140 "committee members" to rule at the Althing. From then on both the king and the clergy had more power over Iceland, despite a considerable opposition from the peasants. Foreign (Norwegian) bishops and "chiefs" repeatedly gained power on the island.

Furthermore, the king appointed a governor and 12 local sheriffs to rule. Meanwhile, slavery slowly died out.

The 13th century was a troublesome time for Iceland, especially the last half. The king was not able to keep peace in Iceland and some of the kings' commanders were accused of behaving almost like robbers. The farmer even fined one of them and Smid Andresson lost his life. The bishops, who were usually Norwegian or Danish until the end of the 15th century, often pursued an unfortunate policy. In addition, the country suffered greatly due to large volcanic eruptions and earthquakes in the 14th century.

In 1380, Iceland and Norway had a common king with Denmark, but this did not change anything in the country's constitution or position. Iceland continued to belong to Norway's crown even after the establishment of the Kalmar Union 1397-1523 (Norway, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Sweden) under one ruler. The black Death epidemic came to Iceland for the 1st time in 1402-1404 and two thirds of the population was lost.

1550-1900

Iceland is administered from Denmark during the Reformation. The crown's economic influence increased sharply as the monastic estate and a large part of the church estate became the king's property. For most farmers, this did not mean much, because they had previously become tenants. Iceland accepted the Lutheran faith with the other Scandinavian countries at the time of the reformation and started to keep records of birth marriage and death a while later.

1900-2000

Iceland remained part of Denmark, but in keeping with the rise of nationalism around Europe in the nineteenth century, and independence movement emerged. The Althing, which had been suspended in 1799, was restored in 1844, and Iceland gained sovereignty after World War I, becoming the Kingdom of Iceland on December 1st, 1918. However, Iceland shared the Danish Monarchy until World War II. Although Iceland was neutral in the Second World War, the United Kingdom invaded and peacefully occupied it in 1940 to forestall a Nazi occupation. Due to the island's position in the North Atlantic, the Allies occupied the island until the end of the war, with the United States taking over occupation duties from the British in 1941. In 1944, Iceland severed its remaining ties with Denmark and declared itself a republic.

Following the Second World War, Iceland was a founding member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and joined the United Nations one year after its establishment. Its economy grew rapidly largely through fishing, although it was marred by disputes with other nations.

Iceland continues to remain outside the European Union.

This concludes the history of Iceland and as for the church records, the Lutheran Church Records have been kept since early 1700s. There are no records kept of birth, marriage and death during the Catholic area. For additional information about Iceland see the following websites:

https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Iceland_Church_Records

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Archives_of_Iceland

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Iceland